Ambushed by myself: growing beyond several unexpected leadership pitfalls

Lester R. Zook

Eastern Mennonite University and **WILD GUYde Adventures**

zooklr@emu.edu, (540) 432-4439

Overview

The human element as a causative agent in adventure incidents is well documented. Here, we turn the spotlight on the interior of the leader. Factors such as routine, competence, and social anxiety can nudge leaders toward mindlessness, and eventually disaster.

Objectives for this session

1. To more deeply sensitize ourselves to the broad area of human attitudes and their causative and contributory effects on outdoor accidents and incidents;
2. To reflect upon and identify potentially dangerous internal attitudes, tendencies, and predispositions that may emerge in our individual leadership practice;
3. To identify administrative and programmatic vulnerabilities to leadership error, and begin designing remediation strategies; and,
4. To foster honesty and transparency as professional traits that will allow us both to learn from our past, and ultimately enable us to lead and provide safer experiences for clients and friends in the backcountry.

Introduction

The human element: accidents don't happen when there aren't humans present

Analyzing numerous accidents in the backcountry, we are seeing that most have human antecedents, rather than being simply attributable to "dangerous activities" or "acts of God." We bring the danger with us. Listen to Jed's list of contributory causes for accidents in the mountains: "*Climbing unroped, exceeding abilities, placing no or inadequate protection, inadequate clothing, climbing alone, no hard hat, inadequate belay …*" They sound pretty human, don't they? In past years, I have focused on the baggage that our clients bring – the *dangerous client*. And it is crucial for leaders to be aware of these dangerous attitudes, and work to mitigate them. Some common themes in many outdoor incidents are ignorance, lack of skill, unpreparedness, materialism, unbased assumptions, hurry, and an unwillingness to change plans.

It's a leadership issue

> "*I never met a man who gave me as much trouble as myself.*" (Dwight L. Moody)

However, my recent attention has turned back to us – the leaders. Leading the activity and leading the group, it could be argued that we actually have a much greater influence on outcomes. Our decisions, our direction, our attention to some facts and inattention to others, our teaching, whether accurate or not, our role modeling, for better or worse – all of these are amplified in their effect through the megaphone of leadership.

What's inside me, the leader, to cause a disaster?

1. Routine/competence

> "There *are days when no one should rely unduly on his 'competence.' Strength lies in improvisation. All the decisive blows are struck left-handed.*" (Walter Benjamin)

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Some stories – what is the common element?

- On Golden Earring (5.7, Moores Wall, NC), Cameron took a several meter fall, pulling his unanchored top belayer into an injury fall as well. Their analysis: "*We both decided that the accident was caused by a lack of common sense, but more because of the lack of difficulty involved. Seeing no present danger, we overlooked the obvious…*" (ANAM, 1991, p. 45)
- At Joshua Tree, Brad decided to free-solo Hobbit Roof (5.10d) but ended the day instead with a ground fall, a shattered right heel, and a trip to High Desert Medical Center. In his words: "*I had done this climb many times [but now realize that] I had no right to think that because I had done it before, I can do it every time*." (ANAM, 1990, p. 30)
- While descending off the International Wall (CO), Mike slipped and fell 18 meters into a chimney. His honest appraisal: "*I have been on this wall many times before, often solo. My concentration was not there*." (ANAM, 1989, p. 55)
- In January of 2006, five men and a puppy became stranded in Lost Creek Cave (GA) after their flashlights died. It was said that they had been in this cave many times before and "*knew what they were doing*." When they were found, it was determined that they had two flashlights for the whole party. Incidentally, a clue found during the search was a pile of dog poop. (NSS News, March 2008, p. 8).
- Finally, Jed Williamson comments on a fatal fall at Chapel Ledges (MA); James mis-stepped as he was anchoring rappel ropes for a church youth group: "*Every few years, there seems to be an accident like this. Experienced climbers and guides engaged in routine operations become mentally engaged in something other than the tasks at hand*." (ANAM, 1988, p. 41)

It is fairly clear that there can be a loss of vigilance that occurs with routine and familiar tasks. Ellen Langer (1991) refers to this as *mindlessness*: a state of mind characterized by an over reliance on categories and distinctions drawn in the past, and in which the individual is context dependent and, as such, is oblivious to novel (or simply alternative) aspects of the situation. A few key phrases about mindlessness:

- Rigid invariant behavior that occurs with little or no conscious awareness
- Treating information as though it is context free and true regardless of circumstances (Paul Petzoldt said, "*Rules are for fools*!")
- Most common when people are distracted, hurried, multitasking, and/or overloaded

By contrast, listen to relevant parts of Langer's definition of *mindfulness*

- Being actively alert in the present
- Being open to new and different information
- Having the ability to create new categories when processing information
- Having an awareness of multiple perspectives

Now think about the skills and procedures that we drill on to take groups safely into backcountry and adventure settings. We have procedures for anchoring ropes, lighting stoves, teaching paddle strokes, and everything else. And we do them many times, over and over, as we run the same trips in the same areas … Is there the potential for eventual mindlessness? Are we surprised that we occasionally find ourselves literally going through the motions?

Langer suggests that how instruction is presented can have the unintended effect of inducing mindlessness:

"*[It is likely to result from] a single exposure to information. When information is given in absolute (vs. conditional) language, is given by an authority, or initially appears irrelevant, there is little manifest reason to critically examine the information and thereby recognize that it is context-dependent. Instead, the individual mindlessly forms a cognitive commitment to the information and freezes its potential meaning*."

Dattner and Dunn (2003) suggest that in this case, "*practice actually makes imperfect*." Practicing too much in the same way can lead to mindlessness. They recommend that in most cases, it is better to improvise a little instead of merely recreating what has been practiced. "*Many experiments have shown that people who succeed on tasks are less able to change their approaches, even after circumstances change (being "wrecked by success.*").

Might this have some implications might this have for how we train our leaders? I have found that there is an inherent conflict here between my role as a boss and what is best for my employees as autonomous guides: I want a predictable standard operating procedure, a constant modus operandi, to satisfy my own mind and my insurance carrier. But in leading this way, I might instead be contributing to the mindlessness of my assistant guides. If they are not invited to tinker with, adapt, and maybe even improve on my procedures, when they get out in the field, they will be less attentive to idiosyncrasies of the situation, differing conditions, and alternative ways to accomplish the task.

2. Social anxiety-ego

"*I think one of the interesting things about poker is that once you let your ego in, you're done for.*" (Al Alvarez)

Dan took a 60-80 foot ground fall at the Daff Dome at Tuolumne, suffering a sprained ankle, cracked ribs, and a simple pneumothorax. Listen to his candid account of cause:

"*At a deeper level, the cause of the accident has to do with the way I learned to climb. I was self-taught, learning primarily from my own successes and mistakes. I did not learn by going out with experienced guides. I was never shown the ropes, was never an apprentice, never put myself in a position to ask a thousand questions and have a thousand of my placements critiqued. Not only was I unwilling to go through such a process of learning, I was also unwilling to acknowledge that I had not done so, either to my climbing partners, or to my employer for whom I was teaching at the time. At the time of the accident, I was co-instructing with two people who both tacitly and explicitly questioned my capabilities and my judgment, and I was trying to convince them, and more importantly myself, that I knew what I was doing. I had become very attached to the idea of myself as an experienced climber. ...[so] my ego was in an uproar because of the threat to my identity as a good climber and instructor caused by the doubts of my co-instructors. My fervent desire to cling to my own self-definition, my unwillingness in the preceding years to allow myself to be a beginner, and my unwillingness that morning to accept my right size, these things caused the accident.*" (ANAM, 1995, p. 41)

Ego: protecting something, creating an image that may or may not be true. Ego is not simply showing off; it is, at its core, self consciousness. Even overweening self debasing is ego driven – "I can't do that…" "Oh, I could never do that." "I" is still at the center – I, I, I. Like the Mennonites that I work for – humble and proud of it. Because we are all fallible, any notions of invincibility are by definition illusions – fictitious constructs of the ego.

So what is really happening when ego gets involved? For part of the answer, I am going to look to another part of my life that many of you will be able to relate to – that of ***the athlete***.

The Distraction explanation: We have known for years that psychologically the most destructive element to an athlete's performance is for them to think about how they look to others while performing. Baumeister, in his study, *Choking under pressure: self-consciousness and paradoxical effects of incentives on skillful performance* (1984), says it this way: "Conscious attention to the performer's own process of performance disrupts the automatic or over-learned nature of the execution. Three studies show that increased attention to one's own process of performance results in performance decrements." So being overly self-consciousness creates a distraction in our minds that draws our mental focus away from the immediate demand. It can also introduce an element of negativity/uncertainty – *Am I measuring up? What are they thinking about me? Are they laughing at me*? The result is ***choking*** – blowing it, mistakes under pressure at the crucial time.

Competence defines the leader. Paradoxically, consciousness of competence/performance becomes a detriment to execution.

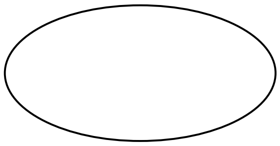
"*The great corrupter of public man is the ego. Looking in the mirror distracts one's attention from the problem*." (Dean Acheson)

A second part of the explanation might lie in my other world – that of ***the college professor***.

The Loss of Objectivity explanation: Can any of us remember a professor with an ego? In the world of higher education, "*An amazing 94% of professors rate themselves as above average teachers, and 68% rank themselves in the top quarter on teaching performance*." (Ross, 1980, p. 7) Do you think this same loss of objectivity might also operate in the guiding profession? ("The difference between God and a Mountain guide? God doesn't think he's a mountain guide.") When we are self conscious, do we lose an objectivity about our situation that prevents us from making good decisions. (**If the professors are any indication, we not only lose objectivity – we lose basic logic**). On Donners Summit (CA), Joe took a groundfall from 50 feet. He knew his second piece at 35 feet was bad, but not being able to get anything else in, he continued to climb. Now already, most of us who lead would know that 2 pieces within 35 feet does not satisfy the objective margin for safety, especially when the higher one is questionable. At 50 feet, he placed a good piece, but after two unsuccessful attempts to clip it and feeling "extremely pumped," he pitched off. The second piece pulled, and he was ground-bound. A broken back, a shattered pelvis, and assorted other injuries were the result. His honest appraisal: "I was more worried about looking good to the other climbers in the area [than climbing intelligently.] [My advice] climb for yourself, not to show off to others." (ANAM, 1994, pp. 34-35)

Ponder words like confidence, humility, arrogance, invincibility

Growing confidence →



→ Hubris ("excessive pride; arrogance")

What's happening in here? What's in this region? How do we tell?

3. Leadership team dynamics

On May 28, 1987, Ben Benson and Frank Jenkins were approaching the summit of Mount Hunter (AK) when they triggered a soft slab avalanche. It swept both men several hundred meters down the slope, eventually killing Benson. Here is a classic example of what appears on the surface to be simply a capricious unavoidable "act of God," but upon deeper inspection, reveals its fateful human dimension. Earlier, the two had disagreed about the relative safety of the ridge route. The survivor also described Benson as "a very strong-willed individual who could be very difficult to turn from a specific direction once he made a decision." Jenkins, however, was the opposite personality – one who did not like to argue." (ANAM, 1988, p. 19).

This illustrates one of several leadership team dynamics that can contribute to disaster. I call this one *Toxic Combo* – two (or more) persons who may have marvelous individual strengths and competencies, but when put together, produce a lethal combination: misdirected motives, bad decisions, and poor quality execution.

Think of some potentially toxic combos on your leadership team:

- Strong-willed alongside acquiescing
- Amorous relationship
- Ego competition (too similar)
- Others?

There can be another leadership team dynamic phenomena; listen to a few telling lines from several disasters:

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“*Everyone knew the hazard was building up, but there was no designated leader who, with the weight of responsibility, would act in a conservative decisive manner and order a halt or discussion*.” (fatal fall in Anemone Pass, British Columbia – ANAM, 1987, p. 17).

“*This group was a typical mix of relatively experienced climbers. Likely, any of the four others could have functioned as a leader, but, as so often happens, none felt that he had been so designated or that it was even appropriate to take charge of others of similar experience*.” (fatal fall on Mount Colden in the Adirondacks, ANAM, 1990, p. 52).

We call this *leaderless among peers*. It is maybe more common when friends are out with buddies, but it can also occur in program experiences if administration fails to designate a leader.

Common here are:

- Unwillingness to verbalize misgivings or raise questions about others’ readiness, skills, or competence.
- Hesitancy to slow or stop the action to force a discussion.
- Tendency to interpret any momentum as positive, without a discerning regard as to which direction it is pointed.
- Avoidance of taking ultimate responsibility.

4. Directive leadership, fostering group-think and destructive goal pursuit

Groupthink – a definition: “*A deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment that results from in-group pressures*.” (Janis, 1972, p. 9). Janis then identifies 8 symptoms of groupthink:

1. Illusion of invulnerability
2. Collective rationalization
3. Belief in inherent morality
4. Stereotyped views of out-groups
5. Direct pressures on dissenters
6. Self censorship
7. Illusion or unanimity
8. Self-appointed “mind-guards”

A Case in Point: “*A legendary accident in Alaska involved a ten-man team of British soldiers, who set out to climb 20,320 foot Mount McKinley on June 4, 1998. At their mandatory briefing, the rangers at Talkeetna recommended the easiest route, called the West Buttress, because some of the team members had very little experience with the glacier crossings and ice climbing that would be necessary on other routes. Nevertheless, the army team ignored the advice and decided to climb the West Rib, which is Grade 4. As they proceeded in three rope teams, one man fell, dragging the others on his rope down with him. All three people on the rope were injured, but one, Steve Brown, suffered head injuries, went into shock, and became delirious. In all, the group split up a total of seven times, as various members tried to climb down or rescue one another. The expedition descended into chaos as several others fell and were injured. The final rescue wasn’t completed until June 22, nearly three weeks after the soldiers had set out, by which time two climbers had spent four nights partially exposed in bivouac bags during bad weather. ... The military uses groupness deliberately to create strong bonds among its members from the squad level right up through the entire organization. Groupness is used specifically to reinforce self-confidence in the group’s abilities. That can-do attitude, along with the tendency to reject information from the outside, no doubt contributed to the British team’s decisions throughout the incident, from selecting the harder route to attempting various descending routes, despite having no practical knowledge of them.* “ (Gonzales, 2008, 30)

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"*Research on conformity began in the 1930's and has consistently indicated that a person's judgment, when in the presence of others, will tend toward a group norm."* (Moore, 2000, 2) "The nail that sticks up gets hammered down."

Destructive Goal Pursuit: More recently, Kayes (2006) has done some thinking about the psychology of goal-setting, and how personal and shared goals can become destructive forces. He uses the 1996 Mount Everest disaster as his case study.

"*Pursuing the summit of Everest becomes part of who you are. Your self-image becomes inseparable from the summit. Contingencies, unintended consequences, and other obstacles attempt to get in your way but ultimately fail to distract you. And distractions they are, since such obstacles only remind you to focus on what is important – achieving your goal. You focus on the summit. You become determined to meet your goal. The goal itself is straightforward: summit the mountain. You know, at least in theory, how this can be done. You put trust in the expedition leaders, and they reassure you they have it all figured out. Stay the course, don't get distracted, and listen to their guidance. Don't worry about the inevitable setbacks, such as the lack of sleep, the uncomfortable cough, the egos of your climbing partners. Focus on attaining your goal. You don't need to worry about finding excuses because you will have success. Your sense of self and the goal have become inseparable.*" (2006, 41)

Goal: an idealized future state, an optimal outcome

Theodicy: people who hold strong beliefs often seek to maintain those beliefs even in the face of contradictory information. Individuals rely on future desired states to rationalize current suffering.

Goalodicy: destructive goal pursuit "The more a person, group, or organization relies on a future as yet unachieved goal as a source of identity, the more likely they will persist at pursuing the goal beyond what is reasonable."

"*The goal serves not only as the destination but also as the means to justify the continued pursuit of the goal.*" (2006, 44)

"*Goalodicy emerges as leaders and their followers begin to ignore new information, especially when this information contradicts current beliefs about achieving the goal. Goalodicy provides a tool to maintain the motivating power of goals, even when new information may indicate that the goal cannot be achieved. The problem of goalidicy lies in the following complication: Goals motivate leaders and their followers to continue to put more effort into achieving a desired outcome. In many cases, however, the additional effort will not lead to goal achievement. Goalodicy describes a situation in which the more effort that is put into achieving the goal, the more likely the goal will become destructive.*" (2006, 44)

Straw (1993) refers to this as "*an escalation of commitment to a failing course of action.*"

Put this together with Janis' ideas about Groupthink. What we observe is that ***when group identity and goal striving are intertwined, leaders may in fact wittingly or unwittingly evoke group-think to maintain commitment to both group and goal.***

Ahlfinger and Esser (2001) called these "promotional leaders" (leaders who promoted their own preferred solutions, or strongly advocated one particular course of action). They found that groups with this kind of leader produced more symptoms of groupthink, discussed fewer facts, reached decisions more quickly, and hence practiced poorer decision-making processes and produced lower quality decisions than groups with non-promotional leaders.

Taken together, I would offer a few observations:

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1. Reinforcing group norms is not just a matter of a few exerting their will on a group – it is about reinforcing group identity – something, incidentally, that we tend to give considerable time and attention to early on in our program groups and expeditions. Are we sowing the seeds of goalodicy?
2. "Tightly coupled to a weak chain." "Any mountaineering party can only accomplish what its weakest member is capable of (Fredston, Fesler, and Tremper, 2000, 4). By reinforcing group identity, we have more tightly coupled ourselves to the weak link in the chain, making escape even more difficult.
3. Let's not forget about "risk shift" – that well researched phenomenon in which being in a group impels people to take riskier decisions than when they are alone.

I would offer that we should work to build a group identity based upon flexibility and adaptability, rather than some indomitable ability to overcome all obstacles. "*The rigid person is a disciple of death – the flexible one a lover of life*."

Applications and Take-aways

> "*The cultivation of awareness gives one the basis for detachment, the ability to stand aside and see oneself in perspective in the context of one's own experience, amidst the ever present dangers, threats, and alarms … Awareness is not a giver of solace – it is just the opposite. It is a disturber and awakener. Able leaders are usually sharply awake and reasonably disturbed. They are not seekers after solace. They have their own inner serenity*." (Greenleaf, 1977, pp. 27-28)

1. Internal audit: personally, where is my "sitting duck?"
2. Programmatic and administrative audit: where is our organization/program vulnerable (routine, toxic combo)?
3. Learning from my past; unpacking my epics

Cathye Haddock (1999) tells us that the epic stories we tell are often actually HIPO events (near misses, incidents with a High Potential for Harm) that we have camouflaged with glory and heroics. Are you courageous enough to unearth your epic stories; is there some truth-telling that needs to happen? What can you learn from looking honestly and deeply into your past experiences? What is the humor hiding?

> "*On the occasion of every accident that befalls you, remember to turn to yourself and inquire what power you have for turning it to use*." (Epictetus)

4. What are the implications for you regarding staff selection? Training?

Resources

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